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Arts & Life

National Coming Out Day celebrated in Denton

By Sophia Carbajal
Senior Arts & Life Writer

Pride flags, rainbow streamers and banners decorated the outdoor space of Denton's Harvest House bar. On the inside, members of the queer community tell their personal experiences through music, poetry and dance.

Each performance varied in tone, Some performers reminisced about happy memories of finding acceptance, while others called out the harmful stigma surrounding the queer community.

Twenty-eight-year-old Brooke Hoese, an OUTreach Denton member, attended the showcase event to support their friends and community members.

"I think National Coming Out Day is really important to give younger people, or on the opposite end of that spectrum, people who have been in the closet for a long time, just a little bit more courage and reassurance that you're not alone, that you can do this and there is a community waiting for you," Hoese said.

From 6 to 8 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 11, dozens of people gathered to celebrate pride through art and performance. The event was organized by OUTreach Denton and Spiderweb Salon, local groups that provide resources and safe spaces for Denton's LGBTQ+ community.

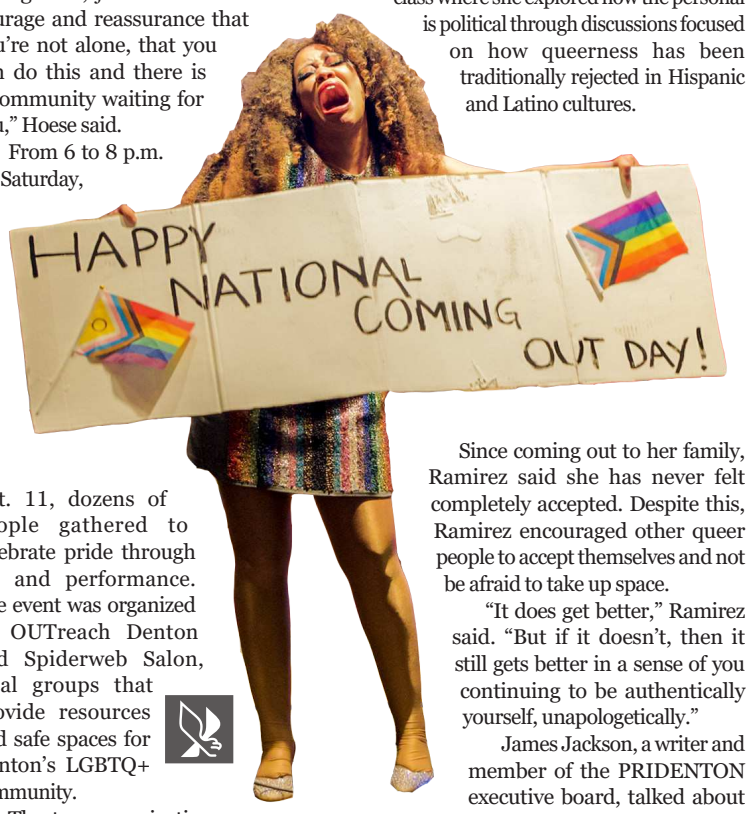

Photo by Dilip Devanda

The two organizations showcased their community zine, a collection of art pieces that members of OUTreach Denton created to express queer identities.

The event also featured local performers such as Fawn.X, a drag performer who danced around a large box on stage to songs like "I'm Coming Out" (1980) by Diana Ross and "Leave the Door Open" (2021) by Bruno Mars.

At the end of her performance, Fawn.X opened the box, unveiling a sign that read "gender is a universe not a box," with the crowd erupting in cheers.

Born out of the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s, the idea that personal identity is political has given way to the idea that someone has to come out.

National Coming Out Day was first celebrated in the United States in 1988 to commemorate the anniversary of the Second National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, held on Oct. 11, 1987.

One of the performers, Vanessa Ramirez, a doctoral student and teaching fellow at the university, shared stories of how her family reacted when she came out as queer. Last spring, Ramirez taught a Latino literature class where she explored how the personal is political through discussions focused on how queerness has been traditionally rejected in Hispanic and Latino cultures.

Since coming out to her family, Ramirez said she has never felt completely accepted. Despite this, Ramirez encouraged other queer people to accept themselves and not be afraid to take up space.

"It does get better," Ramirez said. "But if it doesn't, then it still gets better in a sense of you continuing to be authentically yourself, unapologetically."

James Jackson, a writer and member of the PRIDENTON executive board, talked about how coming out does not always mean individuals are done exploring their identity and self-expression during his performance at the showcase event.

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Sports

Mean Green football falls short in front of program-best crowd of 31,386

Sophomore running back Makenzie McGill II is tackled while running the ball against South Florida at DATCU Stadium on Oct. 10, 2025. **Photo by Ismael Beltran**

By Haylie Stum
Senior Sports Writer

In what could have been a program-defining game, the matchup on Friday, Oct. 10, brought more questions surrounding the North Texas football program, as the Mean Green dropped their marquee match with the University of South Florida 63-36.

An official crowd of 31,386 fans lined the rows of DATCU Stadium's seating, the largest attendance in North Texas history. The figure surpassed the previous record of 30,123 against the Houston Cougars in 2019.

The vast sea of black in the crowd for the team's "Blackout Game" progressively drained in the second half, as South Florida recorded 352 yards of total offense and six touchdowns in the final two quarters.

"I'll beat myself up for a long time over this one just because it was a great opportunity for our fans, program, university, on national television," head coach Eric Morris said. "I thought we had a stretch there to capture the momentum at the end of the first half, and we did just the opposite."

Morris's renowned offense got the ball first, swiftly forced to punt after three downs. The North Texas defense then stepped up to set the tone. A strip sack from sophomore safety Quinton Hammonds helped the Mean Green offense put together the first touchdown drive of the evening, capped off by a 2-yard run from redshirt freshman quarterback Drew Mestemaker.

The defensive unit spelled trouble for South Florida soon thereafter, as senior linebacker Shane Whitter recovered a fumble on the next drive. As Whitter placed the ball back into the hands of his quarterback, it ultimately ended a streak the Mean Green did not want to let go of. During North Texas' possession, Mestemaker tossed his first interception of the 2025 season to senior linebacker Jhalyn Shuler.

The Bulls capitalized on the pick, entrusting senior quarterback Byrum Brown to mow through the Mean Green defensive line with his speed. Shredding pressure, he strung together three quality runs to manufacture South Florida's first touchdown with less than three minutes to go in the first quarter.

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News

Regents professor of tuba Donald Little to retire after 50 years

By Diego Hernandez
Deputy News Editor

When Donald "Don" Little arrived in Denton in 1976, the university had fewer than 20,000 students, and the College of Music was still called the School of Music.

He was a 27-year-old tuba professor from New Jersey who had never been south of Virginia. He carried a single suitcase and a brass instrument case when he stepped onto campus for the first time.

Fifty years later, Little, who saw the program become what it is today, will retire in May, closing a career that has spanned generations of musicians, hundreds of students and half a century of campus growth.

"I have had a great run," Little said. "I have been lucky. My heart will always be here."

Little grew up in a modest musical family, where his mother played piano and his father sang in the church choir.

He began playing the piano, moved to trumpet in middle school and found his way to the tuba by chance when a teacher offered it to him. He enjoyed the challenge immediately and decided to keep playing.

Little earned a bachelor's degree in music education at the Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and a master's performance degree at Northwestern University in Chicago. After a few years freelancing in orchestras, he took his first full-time teaching position at the University of Northern Iowa.

When a colleague encouraged him to apply for an opening at the university, he took the chance.

"I was not even going to apply," Little said. "A colleague told me that if there had been a trumpet position there, he would have gone himself. I came down to interview, and they offered me the job by the end of the day."

The university was smaller back then, but the School of Music already carried a national reputation for its jazz program, Little said.

"The College of Music has always been strong, but it has become even stronger," he said. "We have more international students now and more graduate students than ever before. I have been lucky to be a part of that growth."

Professor Donald Little gives university student Logan Runnakko advice during a tuba private lesson in his office on Oct. 14, 2025. **Photo by Alejandra Osegueda**

Kasitdej "Nino" Vuddhananda is a doctoral student from Thailand who has studied with Little for five years. Vuddhananda first reached out to Little from Bangkok, Thailand, sending performance videos and a short introduction because he was curious about learning under Little's guidance.

Vuddhananda then received a detailed response and a set of practice exercises.

"To me, he is a teacher with a heart," Vuddhananda said. "He never promotes himself or talks about his achievements. He helps you become a better person and musician."

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University students should invest more of their education in building soft skills

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‘My heart will always be here,’ professor of tuba retires after half a decade

TUBA continued from page 1

During the pandemic, Vuddhananda was accepted into the university but was unable to travel to the United States. Little advised him to delay his plans.

“He said, ‘If you were my son, I would tell you not to come right now, it is not worth it,’” Vuddhananda said. “That meant everything. It showed how much he cared.”

Little’s approach to teaching focuses on the student first, he claims. Each semester, Little would ask students to list their short-term and long-term goals to remind them of their purpose.

Junior music education major Felix Tovar said Little’s lessons felt both structured and personal, saying Little “listens to your sound and immediately knows what to do.”

During lessons, Tovar said Little examines everything from how hands move across the tuba to breathing habits and makes adjustments to best aid students’ learning. Tovar also said Little is very compassionate outside the classroom.

When Tovar could not afford a tuba, Little lent him one of his own, a professional horn valued at $15,000. Little guided other students with instruments and housing, often using his own resources.

“He looked out for everyone,” Tovar said. “He helped people even when he did not have to.”

For decades, Little balanced teaching with performing. He played with the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra for 21 years and the Dallas Opera Orchestra for 24, often commuting between late rehearsals and early classes.

Little met his wife while performing in Fort Worth, and their three children later earned degrees at the university.

In 1989, the university granted Little a faculty development leave to perform with the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra. He arrived in Germany just months before the fall of the Berlin Wall the same year.

Even after half a century, Little said his decision to retire came slowly, unsure at first whether he really was ready to retire or not.

“I was not sure, but I thought about what I had done and how much time I wanted with my grandchildren,” Little said. “It felt like the right moment.”

Professor Donald Little points to a photo of his former instructor holding the tuba inside his office on Oct. 14, 2025. **Photo by Alejandra Osegueda**

Little said he plans to remain in Argyle, Texas, where he may occasionally teach former students preparing for auditions. Most of his time, however, will belong to family and a lifelong hobby that has little to do with music – preserving vintage vehicles.

“The oldest one I have is a Model T [that] is 100 years old [...] My uncle bought it for $25 in the 1950s and spent half his life restoring it,” Little said. “And so all the years that I grew up, and whenever I would go back home to the Jersey Shore, I would see this T in various states.”

Little’s retirement will mark the end of a 50-year era as a professor at the university, and he said he is unaware of any potential replacements, nor does he want to be involved in the process.

Many of Little’s former students now perform in symphonies, teach in universities and lead band programs throughout the country.

“For fifty years, he has been the heart of the tuba studio,” Vuddhananda said. “He taught us that being a good musician begins with being a good person.”

City dismissed from amended Our Daily Bread lawsuit

By Diego Hernandez
Deputy News Editor

The City of Denton and five of its top officials were dismissed from the civil lawsuit involving Our Daily Bread on Oct. 13. The suit accused the city and the shelter of fraud and obstruction in its review.

The ruling came less than two weeks after former shelter resident 38-year-old Adam Horwitz, who uses the pronouns she/they, filed an amended 700-page petition on Oct. 3, expanding her case against the city and the nonprofit that operates the shelter.

“I have a case, like, what they did and continue to do to me and to many others, is wrong,” Horwitz said. “The facts on the record show that, and if I do not pursue this, then they are just going to keep on doing it.”

The amended filing added federal claims under the Civil RICO Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Fair Housing Act, naming city attorneys and shelter managers in what Horwitz described as a pattern of falsification and retaliation tied to an ongoing discrimination investigation.

The 442nd Judicial District Court granted the city’s Rule 91, a motion to dismiss Horwitz’s plea to the court, ending city-related claims with prejudice, a ruling that prevents refiling the same allegations.

In an Oct. 6 motion, the city argued that “Sara Hensley, Jesse Kent, Mack Reinwand, Devin Alexander, and Amanda Brown were acting within the course and scope of their employment” and asked the court to dismiss Texas-law claims against them under Section 101.106(e) of the Texas Tort Claims Act.

Despite being the plaintiff, Horwitz said she did not receive direct notice of the Oct. 13 ruling and learned of it only when the *North Texas Daily* shared it with her the next day.

The *Daily* obtained the orders from City Attorney Mack Reinwand, who said the city could not comment on ongoing litigation.

When asked why Horwitz had not received a notice yet, Reinwand referred to the “Denton County Court System’s local rules,” referring specifically to Denton County’s local e-filing procedures, which automatically email orders to parties through the district clerk’s system.

“What’s wrong is wrong,” Horwitz said. “I am not going to stop just because they do not want to look at it.”

In the Oct. 13 orders, the court accepted the city’s position that shelter operations fall within governmental immunity. The ruling left Our Daily Bread, its executive director, Wendy McGee, and several shelter managers as the remaining defendants.

She claims Horwitz’s petition accused officials of wire fraud, forgery and evidence tampering related to records sent to the Texas Attorney General and the Texas Workforce Commission. She claims Deputy City Attorney Amanda Brown and Deputy City Attorney Devin Alexander submitted false statements during those investigations, and that City Attorney Mack Reinwand ratified misconduct by shelter management after being informed of recordings she said contradict official responses.

During an Oct. 7 hearing, Horwitz objected to Alexander’s participation as the city’s counsel despite Alexander being named a defendant in the same case. In her emergency motion, Horwitz sought a hearing to determine whether the shelter operates as a governmental or proprietary function, a distinction central to whether the city can claim immunity.

Denton resident Adam Horwitz presents their exhibit list inside the Denton County Law Library on Oct. 14, 2025. **Photo by Hannah Everett**

She contends that the shelter functions as a proprietary operation, comparable to a contracted social services provider, and therefore should not be shielded from liability. The city maintained that it performed a governmental function under its authority for homelessness and public safety in the filings.

The dispute began months earlier when Horwitz filed their original petition on Aug. 8, alleging negligence and retaliation after the shelter allegedly failed to accommodate her medical and dietary needs. She said top-bunk assignments caused chronic back injuries and that repeated denials of vegan meals violated her religious beliefs.

The amended petition extends those claims.

Horwitz contacted state and federal agencies, including the Texas Workforce Commission, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Health and Human Services Office for Civil Rights.

The petition alleges that city attorneys and shelter staff engaged in a pattern of falsifying documentation and tampering with evidence that was sent to the Texas Attorney General and the Texas Workforce Commission.

“Instead of exercising oversight abilities, they engaged in elaborate cover-ups,” Horwitz said. “Leadership change is probably one of the most pressing things, because all of this is happening at the leadership level.”

Editor’s note: This article has been shortened for print. Read more at ntdaily.com.

Faculty Senate addresses dip in college readiness and promoting civil discourse on campus

By Hannah Everett
Managing Editor

During their monthly meeting, the university's Faculty Senate addressed what they described as a dip in college readiness in the past few years. The Senate discussed training for faculty on handling discourse in classrooms.

University President Harrison Keller said the university is seeing "unprecedented levels" of underprepared students in math-intensive programs. Keller said there are also "unacceptably high" rates of students getting D's and F's or withdrawing from courses.

"I get the problem and the disconnect between the baseline state's definition of College Career and Military Readiness and what you actually need to be competitive for our degree programs at UNT," Keller said during the meeting. "What we've got to do is meet the students where they are, give them clear signals and not put them in a position where they know they would likely be in over their heads."

Keller said the university, which has a 72 percent acceptance rate, needs to support students in areas where they need help in order to be admitted and succeed in their desired degree programs.

The university, which has been test-optional for admissions since the COVID-19 pandemic, has seen a decline in college readiness since 2020, Keller said.

According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, almost 40 percent of students entering Texas colleges do not meet Texas Success Initiative standards for college readiness. The data suggests that 25 percent of students entering four-year universities and 60 percent of students entering community colleges are underprepared.

The university enrolled 46,309 students for the 2025 academic year, representing an increase of over 10,000 students in the past decade.

Senator Srinivasan Srivilliputhur asks university President Harrison Keller a question during the Oct. 8 Faculty Senate meeting. **Photo by Aiden Gonzalez**

"On admissions, I would still argue that we need to maintain the position that we should be accessible," Keller said. "That is one of the things that sets UNT apart [...] we say we will educate every qualified student who commits to learn with us."

Keller said the university's enrollment analytics team is working to evaluate "markers" of college readiness for math-intensive major programs and empirically measure students' abilities before allowing enrollment in programs such as computer science and engineering.

"So at UNT, could we say empirically 'here are the kinds of things you need to know and be able to do' [...] so that, culturally, would be different and it would require us to make some changes in how we're supporting and advising students," Keller said.

Keller said the university is establishing "much more robust" partnerships with community colleges to train and support dual-credit instructors, as well as to establish transfer and co-enrollment partnerships.

"So students, for example, who've taken a sequence of dual credit courses that align with what they would need to be competitive in one of our programs, they would have a clear line of sight to be able to transfer and be admitted directly into those programs," Keller said.

Senator Sundeep Mukherjee, a professor in the College of Engineering, inquired whether there had been a discussion in administration about the minimum admission requirements for students to address the concern of declining student quality. Mukherjee said it puts a burden on instructors to meet students who are not ready where they are.

"There is a lot of concern between my constituents about the decline in student quality over the last couple of years," Mukherjee said. "We feel that what should be the minimum admission standard and where the floor should be, rather than admitting as many students as we can."

Keller and university Provost Michael McPherson talked about "promoting civil discourse," which he said has come up in "multiple contexts" in recent months.

"Well beyond the recent issues that have come up that have been in the news, we've got to do more to help foster and support a culture where we are equipping students to engage in these dialogues," Keller said during the meeting.

Keller said the conversation about promoting "constructive dialogue and civil discourse" began over the summer. He said the university has created an initiative about civil discourse in partnership with the Institute for Citizens and Scholars.

The Institute for Citizens and Scholars is a nonprofit organization that collaborates with higher education leaders to promote civic engagement on college campuses. Keller said the partnership gives the university access to a network of other institutions and their practices involving civil discourse.

"Students will say they want to be able to talk about complex issues, they want to be able to talk about [...] things they couldn't talk about in high school," Keller said during the meeting.

The Institute of Citizens and Scholars will help design faculty training programs for facilitating difficult dialogues in class settings, Keller said.

McPherson said he asked the Faculty Success Office to put together a workshop training to equip faculty to deal with circumstances that might arise in the classroom.

"The students have said they appreciate that this puts pressure on the faculty member to help facilitate these conversations," Keller said. "The faculty have said they see this as part of their responsibility to educate our students as good citizens. These are also skills employers say they are looking for."

Keller said the initiative will include several events, new curriculum work and faculty training. The initiative will be announced during the State of the University address on Nov. 5, Keller said.

"There are courses where we could be intentional about making sure we're equipping and supporting our students in developing these skills," Keller said.

OUTreach Denton and Spiderweb Salon celebrates being 'authentically yourself'

PRIDE continued from page 1

Recounting a memory from years ago, Jackson stood on stage and shared a story about not knowing how to come out as queer and transgender. After his story, Jackson read a poem he had written about his experience with the in-betweenness or ambiguity of queer identities.

Jackson said labels are not what is important about being queer, and it is okay to be unsure and not know who you are.

"It is a lifelong experience, because sometimes you learn a bunch of things or something changes in the world, and maybe that isn't who I am anymore," Jackson said. "It's important to, not really to question yourself, but kind of look back at who you are and think about what is important to you and what that means for you."

Hoese said they chose to come out to their friends and family in a Facebook post on National Coming Out Day 10 years ago.

"I guess it had been weighing on me for a while," Hoese said. "I really didn't like hiding it and then there was an excuse and I was feeling impulsive, and that was when I came out to my parents."

(From left to right) Brooke Hoese, James Jackson and Meshell Bellah talk during the National Coming Out Day Showcase at Harvest House on Oct. 11, 2025.
Photo by Dilip Devanda

Hoese said they grew up in a large conservative family and were worried their parents would not accept them as nonbinary and bisexual. To their surprise, Hoese's mom was more upset that they did not feel comfortable talking to her in person about their feelings and newfound identity.

"At that time, we did not have a relationship at all, but I really think that was a turning point," Hoese said. "Now, 10 years later, we have an incredible relationship. She's my best friend."

Hoese said they want other people to know that acceptance does happen and uncertainty does get easier. Now, Hoese gives back to the queer community through OUTreach Denton, supporting others in the same way.

"Every year, I really do look back and think about how scary and hard that was," Hoese said. "I'm really proud of myself for doing that."

Things To Do:

Artist Reception | Pam Burnley-Schol: Nested Memory

When: Saturday, Oct. 18, at 5 p.m.
Where: Wells Fargo Bank Building, 101 S. Locust St.
What: For 30 years, the Photos Do Not Bend Gallery has specialized in showcasing photo-based art. Occasionally, the gallery has presented exhibitions of painting, sculpture, ceramics and works on paper. This month, PDNB is presenting a solo show for painter Pam Burnley-Schol.

Fits & Fright Sustainable Market

When: Saturday, Oct. 18, at 1 p.m.
Where: 934 N Locust St, Denton, TX 76201
What: Featuring vendors, local K-pop and drag performers for this family-friendly, community fashion-forward fundraiser. This market supports the beloved Reuse Runway, a Red Bud Tradition, continuation, and supports the mission of education on the importance of sustainability within the community. Hosted by Denton Yarnworks and Reuse Runway.

Laughs in the Rubber Room: Josh Fadem

When: Tuesday, Oct. 21, at 7 p.m.
Where: Rubber Gloves Rehearsal Studio, 411 E. Sycamore St.
What: The first entry in the new Laughs in the Rubber Room series features Josh Fadem taking the Rubber Room stage. Josh Fadem is an actor, comedian, and voice artist originally from Tulsa, OK. He has numerous television credits, including recurring roles on "Twin Peaks" (1990) for David Lynch, AMC's "Better Call Saul" (2015) as Camera Guy, FX's "Reservation Dogs" (2021), Showtime's "On Becoming a God in Central Florida" (2019) starring Kirsten Dunst and as Liz Lemon's agent Simon on "30 Rock" (2006).

Dentonpalooza commemorates half a decade of fundraising, live music and showcasing Denton's 'local oddities'

By Thomas Trevino
Staff Writer

For five years now, Dentonpalooza has been an annual event for locals to catch a glimpse of their community's scene.

The event is more than just a concert, it is a community-driven fundraiser featuring a hand-curated roster of bands that attempt to capture a wide range of the different genres found in Denton's scene.

"At its core, I wanted it to be a variety show," said Joey Liechty, president of Dentonpalooza and university alum. "I wanted it to be performances from bands and artists you can't see anywhere else, really I'm just trying to showcase the weird and wonderful characters of Denton."

After being "bored to tears" during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and constantly seeing interesting things around town, Liechty created a fake flyer for an event that he never intended to happen.

"It started as a joke," Liechty said. "But the community turned it into something real. Once people started asking where to buy tickets, we figured, why not make it happen?"

Since then, he has continued the tradition, paying homage to the various "local oddities" in a way that benefits the community and provides a fun, safe space for residents.

"Amongst the few people that help work it out," Liechty said, "we've always said that if we can make more money for charity than we take in from sponsorships, then we'll keep doing it."

Dentonpalooza has been a regular supporter of multiple charities, including the Denton Music and Art Collective, The Art Room and Leukemia Texas.

"I have chronic leukemia myself," said James "Shep" Shepard, vice president of Dentonpalooza and university alum. "I've been able to do well with treatment, but I realized I wanted to give back."

Shepard said, "it just felt right" when Leukemia Texas got involved. Since the first Dentonpalooza, the nonprofit has approxiamately raised a little over $30,000 for charity. Lietchy said, "that's enough reason to keep it going."

"We're just really honored and proud that Shep asked us," Lietchty said. "And he's a great living example of someone who's taken his condition and is using it for something super positive."

Leukemia Texas has been involved with Dentonpalooza for the past four years.

"We always definitely appreciate the presence it kind of gives us here in North Texas," said Yoshi Martinez, communication and marketing director of Leukemia Texas. "We're based in Dallas, and [...] to have a presence here in the DFW area is really big for us."

The event featured various local live artists including Brotherhood, Assisted Living, Side Chicks, Matthew and the Arrogant Sea and Everything Is Terrible.

"It's important to do something for the community," said Shane Wright, lead singer of Assisted Living and university alumnus. "We've all had people close to us deal with cancer, so it always means something when we can give back like this."

Dentonpalooza attendee Daniel Parish stands at the Thug Emporium stand while dressed as The Pricemaster at Dan's Silverleaf on Oct. 11, 2025. **Photo by Brendan McDonald**

Having spent years in Denton, the members of Assisted Living view Dentonpalooza as an opportunity to give back to the place that shaped them.

"The whole band's been living here forever," said Camella Weedon, backup singer for Assisted Living and university alumna. "We've always liked to play local. It's a fun way to be a part of something bigger, not just the music, but the reason behind it."

With each performance and partnership, Dentonpalooza continues to highlight the city's creative spirit while supporting those in need. The event will remain focused on keeping that balance, celebrating Denton's culture and giving back to the community.

"We might not raise huge amounts, but what we do raise makes a real difference," Shepard said. "That's what keeps us doing it year after year."

Ghost of Yōtei perfects the open world template in Sucker Punch's latest adventure

By Jake Wilkinson
Staff Writer

Sucker Punch Productions has always been one of PlayStation's hidden gems in its catalog of infamous curators. Now, the company once again delivers with their 2025 game, Ghost of Yōtei, and it is the definition of a perfect sequel.

From their Sly Cooper platforming series in the early 2000s to the open-world action-adventure games in the Infamous series of the 2010s. Their unique mark on the company's golden years has left an impact on the history of the console.

When their last game, Ghost of Tsushima, was released in 2020 amid the pandemic, it allowed players to explore a tranquil world filled with beauty in a time when many could not explore such a world.

The open-world samurai epic, set against the backdrop of the first Mongolian invasion of Japan's northwestern province, was a sure-fire hit at the tail end of the eighth console generation, an era defined by the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One.

Set roughly 300 years after Jin Sakai, played by Daisuke Tsuji, pushed back the Mongols from his island homeland as the protagonist and self-titled Ghost in Ghost of Tsushima, a new warrior rises at the northern edge of the mainland.

Atsu, a bounty hunter played by Erika Ishii, returns to her home in Ezo 16 years after the murder of her family at the hands of Yōtei Six. These ruthless killers, including The Snake, Oni, Kitsune, Spider, Dragon and Lord Saito, have taken control back from the Matasumue clan and Atsu has only one thing on her mind: revenge.

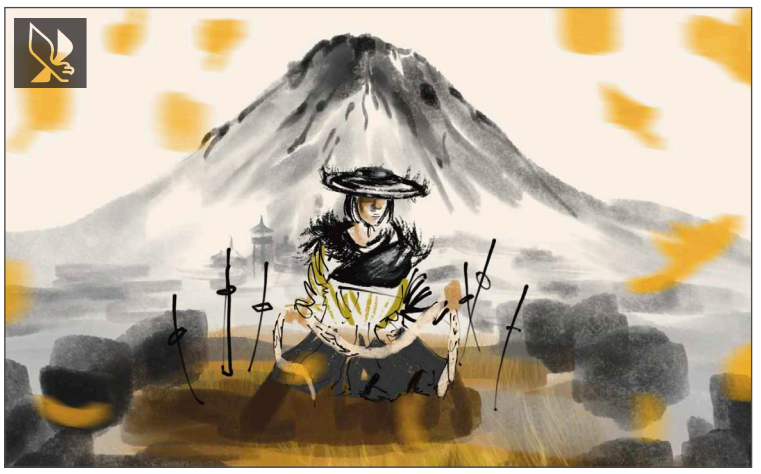


Illustration by Victoria Maldonado

While Ghost of Yōtei might not be groundbreaking in its storytelling, it is a far more human story than the first. Ghost of Tsushima touched on themes of honor, letting go of traditions and betrayal, which made the mythos of both Jin and the samurai far more grand in scope.

Atsu's story is immensely personal. This makes Atsu a more compelling protagonist from the outset, matching and at times exceeding Jin in the first games. The vast world that Atsu rides through, however, is really the star of the show in Ghost of Yōtei, as Sucker Punch's design philosophy reaches new heights.

Ghost of Yōtei, unlike traditional Ubisoft-style games of its kind, uses the wind as its primary objective marker. Allowing the player to take the game at their own pace is fundamental for creating an engaging open-world experience.

From the starting area of the muted yellow grasslands and Mount Yōtei watching Atsu's homeland, to the autumn auburn forest with Ishikari Castle looming above just past the northern gate, the world is simply breathtaking as Astu rides across these picturesque landscapes, finding all sorts of fun activities.

A card system drives everything in Yōtei. When Atsu looks through her spyglass, the player is free to find new locations to explore from the get-go, allowing them to pursue any of the group members any time they want.

Many side activities returned, like hunting for foxes to get new upgrades, and chopping bamboo with timed button presses, alongside new side content. Composing songs on Atsu's shamisen, camping under the stars and taking on bounty posters for coins are all welcome additions. Sucker Punch, like the first, has recaptured the Samurai power fantasy, and as a great sequel, has expanded upon it with its excellent combat.

Sucker Punch has taken those stances and spread them among multiple different groups for Atsu to acquire. Such as the group Dual Katanas, which handle spears, and the Yari, which handle kusarigama. With parries and dodging, the familiar flow of combat remains the same, but the weapon swapping adds much more variety and improves on an already perfect combat system.

Ghost of Yōtei might not be the innovative genre-defining masterpiece like FromSoftware's Elden Ring, but it does refine a perfect template for open-world games going forward. From the far more personal revenge tale and personable protagonist to the world's immense beauty in its side content, Ghost of Yōtei has earned its place as not only one of PlayStation's best sequels in recent memory, but a knockout contender for Game of the Year.

Jake's rating: 5/5

Icon of the Week:

Michael Eugene Archer

Credit **Roquai**

The late Michael Eugene Archer, also known by his stage name D'Angelo, is the *Daily*'s icon of the week. D'Angelo died on Oct. 14 at the age of 51 due to pancreatic cancer.

Born in Richland, Virginia, on Feb. 11, 1974, D'Angelo spent a majority of his free time in the Pentecostal church near his house, where his father was a preacher. Growing up, music was a passion of his, with his brother discovering him playing the house piano as young as 3 years old.

At 18, D'Angelo moved to New York, New York after dropping out of school. During his time away from home, he would compete in amateur night shows at Harlem, New York's Apollo Theater, where he would win cash prizes and local recognition.

Upon returning home, D'Angelo was inspired to create his own musical project. Not long after, he signed with a joint publishing company under Universal Music Group.

Later, his 1995 debut album "Brown Sugar" was certified platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America.

He garnered 14 Grammy Award nominations over his career and won four of them.

Saint Motel's companion album 'Afterglow' expertly utilizes symphonic exploration and emotional intimacy

By Gianna Ortner-Findlay
Editor-in-Chief

When indie-pop band Saint Motel's fourth album, "Saint Motel & the Symphony in the Sky," was released earlier this year on Valentine's Day, it was met with a mixed reception.

At the time of its release, the album was just one part of an ongoing project for the band, and its companion album "Afterglow" picked up right where "Symphony in the Sky" left off, if not more effectively.

The 10-track, 35-minute and 24-second album released on Oct. 10 builds upon the groundwork laid by the sister album, but moves away from some of the more stereotypical lyricism found in "Saint Motel & the Symphony in the Sky," leaning instead into musicality.

While "Afterglow" retains much of the honey-soaked lyrics found in the previous album, it gives the band — comprised of frontman and pianist Alexander "A. J." Jackson, drummer Greg Erwin, lead guitarist Aaron Sharp and bass guitarist Dak Lerdamornpong — room to explore a symphonic sound.

"Afterglow" opens with "Room With A View (For the End of the World)," featuring a slowly layered intro that starts with simple piano before introducing more melodic elements into the song. Although the intro feels natural and plays into the symphonic nature of both albums, the minute and 20-second stretch to the first verse is more like a marathon than a sprint.

Jackson, who is classified musically as a tenor, makes a bold choice in starting the album high, but the falsetto feels natural and unstrained. The choice provides an almost ethereal quality to the sound, as Jackson sings "All I have known is the curve of the road/winding 'round / Just out of view, closer, closer to / All that I want is the world when you're done, open the door," bringing the listener into the room with Jackson and the presumed lover.

"Wait & See" is a continuation of the big arching piano and artful guitar seen in the previous song, without suffering from the lengthy intro of the first track. The song exudes the same hopeful energy while still weaving through the feeling of surviving an apocalypse introduced in the first track.

Lyrics like "And everything is gonna be exactly what you wanna see / Peace and love and harmony or the end of society" allow the listener to take the lyrics at face value or invite them to dive a little deeper.

The third track, "Hold My Breath," loses itself a little in the first half of the song, slowing down the momentum that was built so expertly in the first two tracks. Melodically and lyrically, the track retains a forward-looking mentality through upbeat drums and the incorporation of overarching strings.

"Peace n Love n Anarchy" features a jaunty rhythm, characterized by a quick and confident feel, which is executed through light piano and playful guitar strumming. The feel of the song is almost a disguise for the lyrics, which are more reflective as Jackson sings, "I don't really find much these days that gets me up out of bed / I'd rather just stay inside with this ever-present sense of dread."

The fifth track, "Let Me Down Gently," achieves a similar effect by pairing contrasting lyrics with the track's sound, but utilizes more horns and strings instead of piano. Amid the positivity woven throughout the track, "Let Me Down Gently" is almost on the same level as the rock love ballads of the '90s, introducing a sense of yearning into the track.

"Can I Paint You" and "Free Refills" are almost a thematic 180 from the previous two tracks. Both songs bring the listener back to the dream-pop feel of the album's first half, while steering away from the long stretches of stand-alone symphonic melodies. "Can I Paint You" references several historical painters, which plays on German composer Ludwig van Beethoven's composition "Bagatelle No. 25 in A minor," known better as "Für Elise" (1810).

"Divine" is an almost perfect blend of the theatrical storytelling and melody that the album has been striving to achieve over the last seven songs. While it is not perfect, and leans into a repetitive motif and lyrics, it is a feel-good song to dance to.

The album's last two tracks, "Where The Sunset Goes" and "Up & Away We Go," are a return to the overtly hopeful feeling of the album. Both songs utilize a reflective tone, and in "Where The Sunset Goes," Jackson sings "Let go, off the deep end / There I go and take the secret road / That only shadows know," telling listeners to let go of what they know and charge forward through uncertainty.

"Afterglow" is a showcase of Saint Motel at their best, pulling together more than a decade's worth of musical knowledge and lyricism and pooling it into one album. While the album is meant to be a companion piece, "Afterglow" far outshines its counterpart, allowing the listeners to interpret their own story within the album.

Gianna's rating: 4/5

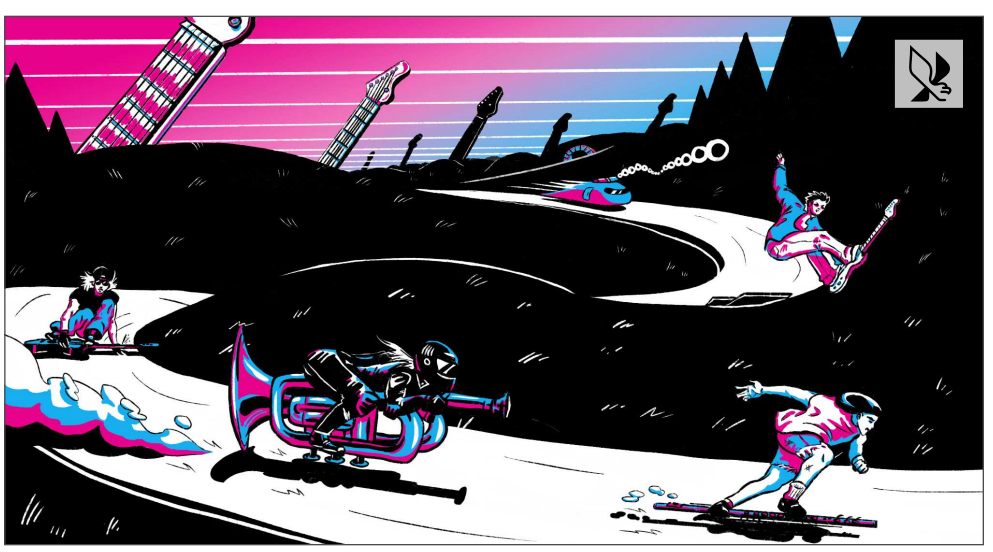


Illustration by Finn Collins

A 63-36 defeat against South Florida gives North Texas first loss amid record crowd

FOOTBALL continued from page 1

North Texas proved that versatility is a well-wielded weapon for their point production, using a triad of connections from various receivers to march down the field. They then turned to sophomore running back Makenzie McGill II to change the look, an adjustment that proved to be fruitful as McGill dashed into the end zone.

Even with 12 seconds left on the clock in the first quarter, the Mean Green still had something left to say. Sophomore cornerback Kollin Lewis closed the first 15 minutes by intercepting a Brown pass as the clock struck zero. His efforts, however, were negated when North Texas received back-to-back false start calls, dropping them in a hole they were unable to climb out of.

South Florida built off the new defensive momentum, tying the game at 14-14 on the following possession. Brown pulled through with his prowess on the ground yet again, garnering a crucial conversion on third-and-6 for the Bulls. He then backed it up with his arm, fitting his pass into a tight window of space created by freshman receiver Jeremiah Koger to score.

The Mean Green and the Bulls exchanged touchdowns to close out the first half's action, both in unconventional ways. North Texas benefited from 30 free yards, stemming from penalties against South Florida.

Working into the red zone, the Mean Green offense orchestrated a flurry of pre-snap movement. This distracted the Bulls' defensive front from sophomore receiver Wyatt Young, who took the snap out of the Wildcat formation and hurried up the middle for a touchdown.

An official crowd of 31,386 fans filled DATCU Stadium, making it the largest attendance in North Texas history.
Photo by Ismael Beltran

North Texas was able to bully the South Florida offense to punt, but a muffed punt was quickly snatched by the Bulls' special teams, placing the team 17 yards out from scoring. A short-change pass from Brown negated the Mean Green's previous score, making it 21-21 at halftime.

Morris said the middle eight minutes "was just as bad as it's ever been," an area of emphasis for the team. The mishap from the North Texas punting unit stood as a turning point in South Florida's favor.

"I feel like the muffed punt for sure did something because towards the end of the half, we could've just ran the ball out and probably [kicked] a field goal," senior linebacker Trey Fields said. "But, stuff doesn't happen that way, and we just have to try and get up."

What was a matchup riddled with give-and-take became lopsided coming out of halftime. The Bulls overwhelmed the scoreboard in the third quarter, tallying four touchdowns in under seven minutes, two of which were prompted by turnovers instigated by their defense.

A North Texas touchdown arose amidst the rally, but South Florida made sure to back it up. They tacked on another seven points on the back of their 6-foot-5-inch, 325-pound offensive lineman Cole Skinner.

The Mean Green chipped away at the deficit in the heart of the fourth quarter, as Mestemaker pinpointed senior tight end Tre Williams III for both a successful touchdown and a two-point conversion connection. Their late score served as the last significant piece of action, settling the score at 63-36.

A great deal of missed chances riddled the matchup for North Texas, ranging from dropped passes and underperformance in the red zone and allowing five turnovers. The most significant unfulfilled opportunity, however, stretched beyond the play on the field, as a win would have had the potential to take the program to the next level.

"We got to get over the hump," Morris said. "We [have to] maximize these opportunities that we have. [...] We got to do our part. We got to find a way to come up and win one of these games."

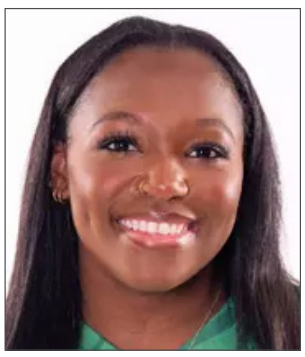
Morris said the team does not have time to "point fingers" as they look to bounce back against the University of Texas at San Antonio in their homecoming game on Saturday, Oct. 18. With a kickoff time set at 2:30 p.m. the message to the team from senior offensive lineman and captain Gabe Blair is clear.

"Just everyone has to do their own job," Blair said. "People just got to focus on what they need to do and nothing else."

Editor's note: This article was originally published online and has been updated for clarity.

Athlete of the Week:

Alexa Washington



Credit **Mean Green Sports**

A triple-double statline had never been recorded before in the entirety of North Texas volleyball history until senior setter Alexa Washington's performance in the 3-2 win against Tulane (9-8, 1-5 American) on Oct. 10. In the game against the Green Wave, Washington had 15 kills, 26 assists and 24 digs, notching double digit figures in each category. As a setter, her 26 assists, alongside freshman setter Sidney Soria's 23 assists, helped the team set season-high marks in kills with 69 and attacks with 213. She also currently leads the team in assists with 382 this season. In kills, Washington herself also directly contributed to the season-high kills against Tulane with 15, which ranked second on the team and was a career high. Finally, with her 24 digs, which ranked first on the team, Washington also set a career high. Her next opportunity to follow up her triple-double will be back at the UNT Volleyball Center versus East Carolina University on Oct. 17 at 6 p.m.

Senior linebacker Shane Whitter blossoms in final college season

By Ian Pfaffenberger
Staff Writer

The mid-afternoon sun shone bright on DATCU Stadium on Sept. 13 as North Texas led the Washington State Cougars by a touchdown in the first quarter. On the Cougars' first offensive drive, senior linebacker Shane Whitter blitzed the quarterback and bulldozed his way through a running back.

He then hit the quarterback in the middle of his throw causing a hurried pass that was intercepted by the North Texas defense. The highlight play was one of many for Whitter this year, who leads the Mean Green in tackles, quarterback hurries and forced fumbles. His efforts have contributed to a revamped Mean Green defense this season, which was ranked in the bottom tier of the country last season.

"Oh man, they play with their hair on fire," senior offensive lineman Jimto Obidegwu said. "I mean, Shane, Trey [Fields], Ethan [Wesloski], [...] I remember going against them in spring camp, and we had to be on our P's and Q's when they're coming down."

For five years, however, Whitter had to wait for his opportunity to make an impact. Before becoming a staple on a dynamic defense, Whitter's college football journey was one of waiting — a process that showed him the value of progressing day by day.

Whitter was a highly-touted prospect coming out of Williams High School in Burlington, North Carolina, rated as a four-star recruit by 247Sports and the No. 11 inside linebacker in the country.

He initially committed to Wake Forest during his sophomore year before flipping his commitment to the University of Oklahoma during his senior year, where all expectations pointed to him becoming a starter at the Power Five level.

Oklahoma became Whitter's home for four seasons and instead of working his way up the depth chart, he was buried on it. Instead he saw most of his time on special teams.

During his junior year in 2022, Whitter suffered a shoulder injury in October that knocked him out for the rest of the season. Missing time further cemented him down the pecking order on the Sooners' roster.

"Not being in the mix with your team as much, I don't know, I felt like I was kind of fading," Whitter said. "Especially coming back [from the injury], it was kind of hard."

Despite the limited playing time, Whitter showed flashes during his minimal opportunities. In his freshman year, he tallied three tackles at the Goodyear Cotton Bowl Classic, offering Oklahoma a glimpse at his potential. However, he started the next year fourth among Oklahoma's weak-side linebackers on the depth chart.

For Whitter though, sitting at the bottom of the depth chart at a Power Five school ended up being a blessing in disguise. He competed alongside players such as current New Orleans Saints linebacker Danny Stutsman, an All-American during his time at Oklahoma, and learned from coaches such as Brian Odom and Alex Grinch.

With the player and coaching talent around him, Whitter was able to develop his football intelligence in ways he could not at Williams High, learning high-level schemes and getting chiseled by his teammates every day at practice.

This, coupled with the Sooners' culture, allowed him to improve his game even while he was not on the field.

"It always hyped me up seeing what they do on the field and seeing them progress," Whitter said. "I felt like so much of the brotherhood wasn't really competitiveness, it was more like, 'I'm going to show you how to do it so you can also be good.'"

With two years of eligibility remaining following his senior year, Whitter was given the chance by Oklahoma to test the waters of the transfer portal. He said he wanted "a different opportunity."

After talking with the Mean Green coaching staff — including Odom who was in Denton for the 2024 season — Whitter knew that North Texas was the place for him. The sentiment was shared by head coach Eric Morris, who saw the potential in Whitter and knew the kind of player he could become.

Photo by Ismael Beltran

"Shane's a great football player, and he's one of those cool stories," Morris said on Sept. 16. "He really wanted his chance to be an every down linebacker. Last year, I thought he had a really good year for us, and to watch him continue to grow and continue to get better, [...] it's been fun for me as a head coach."

Whitter earned a starting role in 2024, starting in five games for the Mean Green and playing some of the best football of his career. He capped the season off with an eight-tackle performance at the SERVPRO First Responder Bowl Game on Jan. 3.

Then, this season, Whitter built on his previous year as North Texas brought in new defensive coordinator Skyler Cassity after the previous defensive coordinator, Matthew Caponi, was fired.

Whitter has relished in the new scheme, with a highlight game against Washington State, where he posted eight tackles, one tackle for loss and an interception. His efforts earned him the American Conference Defensive Player of the Week award.

"It was a great feeling winning it honestly," Whitter said. "I didn't even know until coach Morris told me. Honestly, I don't really look at stuff like that, but it's a great feeling that I'm getting looked at."

Whitter, now in his sixth and final season, has risen to the occasion as a leader in the middle of the defense, leaving everything out on the field in his final games as a college athlete.

"As I continued to trust the process and stick to it, I felt like eventually [success] was going to come," Whitter said. "I'm just glad it finally happened."

Mean Green women's basketball returns no starters from previous year, yet same expectations remain

By Wilson Simons
Staff Writer

Entering his third season at North Texas, women's basketball head coach Jason Burton leads a roster with no returning starters and three total returners. The Mean Green coming off a record 25-9 season, which ended with a second-round exit in the American Conference tournament.

The Mean Green may look different with a roster full of new faces, but Burton is not backing down from the winning standard he has built in Denton.

"That's what we do, man," Burton said. "We're never going to have a year where we don't feel like we're competing for a championship."

Rebuilding the roster marks a sharp transition from one of the most successful seasons in program history, but Burton said now the staff knows what they want in their players.

In addition to adding perimeter shooting and frontcourt size, Burton said every new addition shares a similar desire to win.

"I think when you recruit winners, they know what it takes to win, and it's not easy to win. It's the hardest thing to do in college athletics and [professional] athletics [...]," Burton said. "I think that it's a lot easier to have common goals and shared goals."

Among those transfers with winning mindsets is senior forward Tionna Lidge, who spent the last four seasons at Southern University and reached the NCAA Tournament last year.

Lidge started all 35 games last season, averaging 7.1 points, 4.7 rebounds and 35 blocks with 11 double-digit scoring games. Her double-double in the Southwestern Athletic Conference Championship against Alcorn State is an experience that fits the culture coach Burton said he is aiming to continue at North Texas.

Head coach Jason Burton gives tactics during a timeout against South Florida on March 11, 2025. **Photo by Ismael Beltran**

"It was a fun experience, but it took a lot to get there," Lidge said. "Like just wins and losses, being able to take those on the chin and not getting too high [or] too low and just being steady and competing and doing what we need to do."

Junior forward Andi Schissler, National Junior College Athletic Association All-American transfer from Casper College, said what stands out most to her is how quickly the new group has connected.

"I think we've meshed really quickly on and off the court, [...]" Schissler said. "If you came and saw us how we interact, you wouldn't expect that it was 11 new players on this team." Schissler said.

The team also added players with American Conference experience, including junior guard Aysia Proctor and senior guard Jazzy Owens-Barnett.

Proctor transferred from last year's conference champions, the University of Texas at San Antonio, where she averaged 4.5 points and 1.9 rebounds off the bench.

Owens-Barnett started 12 games for Rice last season before rupturing her Achilles tendon and ending her season. Before the injury, she averaged 4.8 points, 2.2 assists and 1.7 rebounds per game and was also part of Rice's 2023-24 conference championship-winning team that beat North Texas 61-59 in the semifinals.

"You got two players that have American Conference experience that are talented players," Burton said. "I think they're going to have great years this year."

Sophomore guard Chania Price and senior forward Jaelyn Talley are the only two players who played in the 2024-25 season and are returning for the 2025-26 season. Price played in every game, averaging nine minutes per game, while Talley made three starts after transferring from Stetson.

Even with limited returning experience, Burton said the amount of players the team could play in a given game creates the deepest roster he has coached at North Texas.

"That allows us to play [...] big lineups," Burton said. "We can go four [guard lineups] and we can play a lot of different styles, and so it's gonna be a fun year."

The Mean Green will open the 2025-26 season with four consecutive home games, starting Nov. 3 against Oklahoma Christian University at 5:30 p.m. to allow the team to start comfortably at home. Burton said the rest of the non-conference slate was designed to strengthen its NCAA Evaluation Tool or NET rating, which is a tool for evaluating teams, before conference play begins.

With a retooled roster and demanding schedule ahead, Burton is not shying away from expectations. The faces are new, but the mission is the same — keep North Texas competing at the top of the conference.

"We built a team that can win the American," Burton said. "So, although that we have new players, if you look across all the players that we signed and where they were at, they won where they were at."

At a Glance:

Football

Coming off a 63-36 blowout loss to No. 24 South Florida (5-1, 2-0 American Conference), North Texas football (5-1, 1-1 American) returns to DATCU Stadium on Oct. 18 to take on the University of Texas at San Antonio (3-3, 1-1 American). UTSA is coming off a 61-13 victory over American opponent Rice (3-4, 1-3 American). The kickoff between the two in-state rivals is set for 2:30 p.m. and will be streamed on ESPN+.

Volleyball

North Texas volleyball (13-5, 1-3 American) will play its fifth American opponent in East Carolina University (10-7, 2-4 American) on Oct. 17 at 6 p.m., with 10 more conference games to go until the American Championship from Nov. 21-23. The Mean Green are on a two-game winning streak into the matchup, while the Pirates arrive off a loss to Florida Atlantic University (13-6, 4-2 American). After ECU, the team's next home game will be 12 days later on Oct. 29 in its final non-conference game against Abilene Christian (8-12, 2-3), which takes place in the middle of the Mean Green's American slate.

Soccer

The Mean Green soccer team is currently on the outside of the American Conference Championship with four more games left on its schedule. North Texas (5-9-2, 1-4-1 American) is currently ranked No. 10 out of 11 teams in the conference standings, with a 1-4-1 American record. Only the top eight teams advance to the conference tournament. The University of Alabama at Birmingham is currently in that eighth seed spot with a 1-2-3 American record. The Mean Green's first opportunity to make it back into eligibility for postseason play is against Rice (9-2-3, 3-1-3 American) on Oct. 19 at 1 p.m.

North Texas men's basketball prepares for first season under new head coach Daniyal Robinson

By Dante Longoria
Staff Writer

North Texas men's basketball will take the floor with a brand new team on Nov. 3 against New Mexico Highlands, as the Super Pit has already said goodbye to last year's 15 players and six coaches. The stadium will instead welcome 12 new players and the official start of head coach Daniyal Robinson's first season in Denton.

Robinson, hired from Cleveland State, brings experience from three seasons with 20-plus wins and a defensive-minded mentality, averaging 69.2 points across three years. In his final season with the Vikings, his squad allowed the fewest points in the Horizon League at 66.5 per game. His arrival begins a new chapter for a program building off five consecutive postseason appearances.

"We're all in this together," Robinson said. "Everything we do will be a first for our program with us. We see those as opportunities to grow, to learn, to compete."

Senior guard Will McClendon, a transfer from San Jose State, spent his last season with the Spartans and the two previous at the University of California, Los Angeles. He brings NCAA Tournament experience and leadership to a program he said "feels like a family."

Robinson's family atmosphere features four transfers from his previous stop at Cleveland State, including senior forward Dylan Arnett, sophomore guard Je'Shawn Stevenson, junior guard Cole Franklin and his own son, sophomore forward Reece Robinson.

Arnett and Stevenson were among Daniyal Robinson's top four scorers at Cleveland State last season. Arnett averaged 11.3 points and 7.1 rebounds per game, shooting 61.6 percent from the field, while Stevenson, who won the Horizon League's Freshman of the Year, averaged 9.8 points per game on 44.5 percent shooting.

Credit Mean Green Sports

Following Franklin to Denton, Arnett, a six-foot-nine-inch forward, credited his development to Daniyal Robinson, whom he has worked with since he was 17 years old.

"I've grown up around him, learned what's expected, and try to be an 'everyday guy,'" Arnett said. "Being solid, knowing my role, helps the team because they know what to expect from me every day."

Reece Robinson adds depth and familiarity with his father's system. Franklin and Stevenson bring scoring and defensive versatility, rounding out a committee of team leaders.

"Two of those guys are on our leadership council with Dylan and Je'Shawn, and then Reece and Cole are our future leaders," Daniyal Robinson said. "Those guys impact our culture and how we do things on a day-to-day basis, and that's really helped."

North Texas first gathered as a full roster on May 28, giving Daniyal Robinson time to mold a cohesive unit from a rebuilt roster.

"Depth is really important," Arnett said. "This is the most complete roster I've ever been part of. We have a very talented group and can play anyone in the lineup. That makes practice competitive every day."

With multiple players capable of contributing at a high level, the roster's balance allows the Mean Green to rotate freely and stay fresh deep into games. Daniyal Robinson said the strategy "means everyone stays engaged," allowing the team to rely on multiple players despite not seeing the floor for long stints at a time.

As the Nov. 3 season tipoff draws near, North Texas' roster features 10 out-of-state players who have adjusted to new surroundings while building chemistry both on and off the court.

Arnett, who is a Chicago, Illinois native, said the move has been "a great life experience," embracing the warmer weather and larger campus atmosphere that come with being "at a real football school."

For Sacramento, California native McClendon, the community's smaller, close-knit setting has provided a welcome shift in pace and focus. McClendon said the change "breeds focus" and helps the team "keep the main thing the main thing" as they prepare for the season ahead.

Daniyal Robinson said his system emphasizes fundamentals, accountability and team-first principles. The program focuses on rebounding, ball security and consistent defense while nurturing leadership and growth.

Heading into the season, the Mean Green were picked seventh in the American Conference Coaches' Poll ahead of this week's gathering in Birmingham, Alabama. From overhaul to opportunity, Daniyal Robinson said the team will embody depth over continuity to rise above their No. 7 preseason ranking.

"It's hard to rank a team with 12 new players," McClendon said. "At the end of the day, it's a baseline. We see it and will use it as fuel for our fire."

University students should invest more of their education in building soft skills

By Leyla Aktas
Staff Writer

To get hired and succeed in life, one needs to develop skills beyond those offered by college coursework alone. Students forget that a diploma should represent more than proof of completing courses, committing themselves to learning coursework and book knowledge.

Diplomas alone will no longer guarantee the rest of life's steps in gaining a stable career. Job recruiters have begun to value applicants who bring additional skills and expertise outside of their degree. Students should start incorporating and dedicating more soft skills and personal attributes into their studies to prepare for workplace and employer expectations.

At the beginning of the 2025 fall semester, 19.57 million undergraduate students enrolled in universities across the nation, committed to working their way to earn their diplomas.

People often overlook the fact that, on average, after four years of studying, students wear themselves out at university. According to the American Society for Clinical Laboratory Science, four out of five students experience burnout during their undergraduate experience.

Although technical knowledge may appear impressive in today's world, artificial intelligence is advancing rapidly. Access to hard skills, or skills acquired through formal training, has become widespread and more readily available. The actual distinction between individuals in job positions increasingly depends on their soft skills, also known as interpersonal attributes, like the ability to collaborate or empathize with others.

According to a study conducted by the Harvard Business Review, based on 16 million job postings and 130 million resumes, employees with strong soft skills stay employed 30 percent longer and advance in their careers 20 percent faster than those without them.

A diploma alone, according to the review, no longer carries as much meaning as learning on-the-job expertise does. Students must also develop collaboration, teamwork, time management and critical thinking.

While many business leaders believe that a diploma is necessary, alongside a wide range of soft skills, others, such as economist Bryan Caplan, hold a stricter view. Caplan claims that higher education primarily concerns creating the impression of greater intelligence, so public spending on it should be reduced.

Caplan's view of a diploma as merely a tool for social approval may be somewhat understandable, as many employers tend to value the credential itself rather than the actual skills or knowledge it represents.

However, his suggestion that the government should cut education funding is far from realistic. Rather than asserting that a diploma is entirely meaningless, it is more reasonable to argue that it is insufficient on its own.

The real challenge is not to dismiss diplomas, but to rethink how institutions prepare students for life beyond them. Universities and schools should integrate soft skill development into their curriculum, not treat it as an optional benefit.

Higher education's necessity becomes more relevant as careers increasingly require higher education training, with 72 percent of jobs in the U.S. projected to require post-secondary education by 2031, according to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce.

The job market is gradually moving toward a more competitive playing field. As technology continues to replace job positions and more people try to outpace that takeover by getting more higher educational training, like master's and doctorate degrees. However, prioritizing soft skills in education can aid anyone trying to navigate a developing job market.

At the same time, students themselves need to seek opportunities outside the classroom, through internships, volunteering or leadership in clubs, to transform technical knowledge into practical experience.

University should still matter, but not just for the piece of paper awarded at the end. Instead, it should serve as a simulation of adult life, where students practice responsibility, independence and collaboration in a relatively safe environment. A diploma gains its true value when technical and soft skills work together.

Some employers and organizations argue that technical knowledge and credentials should remain the primary focus of education, since they provide the concrete expertise society depends on. This is true to an extent, as foundational careers that serve as cornerstones for society require extension training and education, such as engineers, doctors and scientists.

Even in fields that require extensive training, soft skills determine how effectively professionals communicate, lead and adapt in changing circumstances. A doctor with excellent knowledge but poor empathy may struggle to build trust with patients. An engineer who cannot collaborate may fail to deliver solutions in a team environment.

A diploma should be seen neither as a magic ticket to success nor as an empty piece of paper. It is a foundation, but not the whole structure. What truly defines a person's path in today's world is the ability to combine knowledge with soft skills like collaboration, adaptability and empathy.

With AI taking over a significant amount of jobs that typically require technical training through a bachelor's degree, such as mathematics, individuals with soft skills will be better equipped to adapt in a changing job market.

As AI continues to reshape the future, these skills will keep hirable individuals relevant in the face of software.

A diploma may open a door, but it is the skills, values and resilience individuals carry that allow students to walk through it and build something lasting on the other side. The true purpose of education, therefore, should not be measured only by the certificate at graduation, but by how well it equips individuals to lead, connect and live with purpose in an ever-changing world.

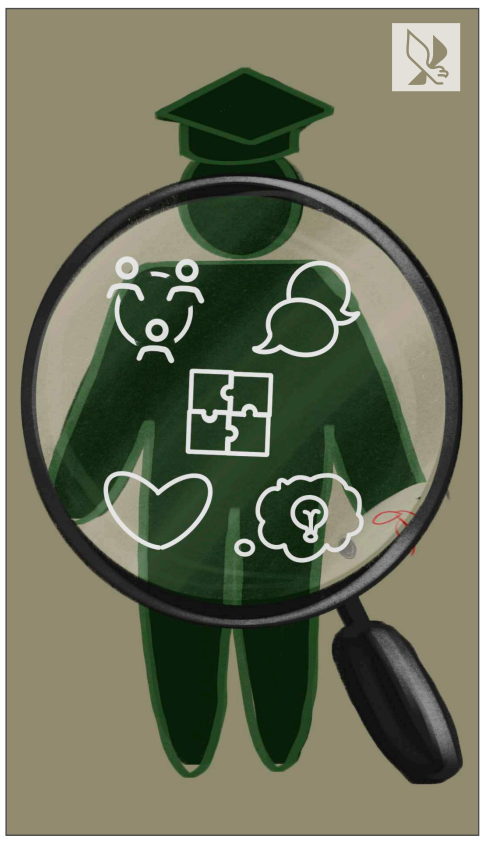


Illustration by Victoria Maldonado

A setback for American intercity rail: canceling the Heartland Flyer will hurt North Texas

By Cooper Collins
Video Editor

The Heartland Flyer Amtrak train route has served North Texas and Oklahoma since 1999 as a cost-effective way to travel between the two sprawling regions. The route was initially scheduled to shut down at the beginning of October.

Canceling the Heartland Flyer route would jeopardize the positive economic effects the Heartland Flyer line has on North Texas and Oklahoma locals. What happens to the Heartland Flyer route will set the example for how public transportation is regarded in the state for generations to come.

The Heartland Flyer is a daily train that runs along I-35 to connect the Oklahoma City and DFW area. It is operated in partnership between the Texas Department of Transportation and the Oklahoma Department of Transportation, according to the Amtrak media center.

The cancellation follows a decision by state officials in June to deny the Texas Department of Transportation a request for $3.5 million in appropriations to keep the route operational.

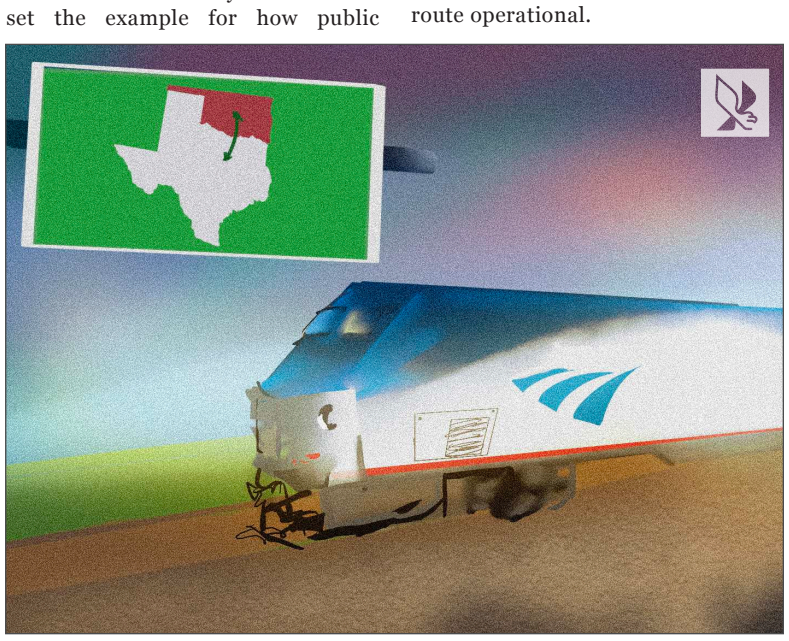


Illustration by Victoria Maldonado

However, after a $3.5 million cash infusion from the Regional Transportation Council of the North Central Texas Council of Governments — the regional metropolitan planning organization for North Texas — the route will be able to continue for at least another year.

The Heartland Flyer served over 63,000 passengers in 2022. That number increased to 80,000 passengers during the 2024 fiscal year, generating $2.2 million in ticket revenue for Amtrak.

Additionally, the Heartland Flyer generated $5.3 million in revenue, alongside $23.7 million in economic activity. Amtrak also employs 50 full-time crew members to keep the route running daily. Without the route, those crew members would be out of a job, and the positive economic impact that the route provides would also be lost.

Local towns, such as Gainesville, Texas rely on the route to connect their residents to larger cities like Fort Worth. According to the Gainesville Economic Development Corporation, almost 7,000 passengers boarded or disembarked the route in Gainesville in 2024.

"It provides a vital transportation option for Texans and Oklahomans alike, and losing it will be a major setback for mobility, our environment, and our economy," Gainesville Mayor Tommy Moore said in a press release.

As sprawling urban development consumes North Texas land, some residents use the route as a way to commute easily.

"I've heard from individuals who frequently use the Heartland Flyer to connect with their families," said Paulina Schutt-Swiatkowski, the communications and outreach director for Gainesville, in an interview on Sept. 16. "They commute to work because Gainesville has a really low cost of living, especially relative to bigger cities like Oklahoma City or the metroplex."

North Texas, as a region, has also experienced significant population growth, with Tarrant County's population increasing by 22.2 percent from 1.8 million in 2010 to 2.2 million in 2025.

A larger population leads to more individuals owning private vehicles and contributing to higher traffic levels. Higher traffic congestion leads to increased accidents, lower air quality and higher economic costs. The most effective way to alleviate traffic is to encourage people to use public transit.

Another factor that makes it critical for the Heartland Flyer to continue is the upcoming 2026 World Cup, where the DFW metroplex is expected to play a significant role. The Federation Internationale de Football Association announced that the metroplex will host nine soccer matches, the most out of any host city, along with the international broadcast center for the whole competition.

While the World Cup will come and go, the factors that make DFW a center for business and commerce will continue to sharpen. However, if DFW loses the Heartland Flyer, that edge would be lost, and DFW would appear less competitive, potentially harming its business.

Having the Heartland Flyer as a vital piece of public transportation for the metroplex is crucial in attracting visitors from Oklahoma and setting a positive example for promoting public transportation in the area.

Alongside a cascading effect on other public transit systems in DFW, such as Dallas Area Rapid Transit and Trinity Metro, canceling the Heartland Flyer could also lead to reduced support from cities and the state government. Fort Worth should strive to keep the Heartland Flyer operating not just for those who use the route now, but also as a promise for what public transportation in DFW could be in the future if it is properly invested in.

The Texas State government must step up and do its due diligence to fund public intercity transportation, especially since community leaders across North Texas and Oklahoma have expressed the significance the Heartland Flyer has for the area. If the Heartland Flyer is not properly invested in now, public transportation in DFW will take a step back, and communities that benefit from it will suffer the consequences.